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ABSTRACT

This digest describes community college honors programs with regard to their origins and goals, consistency with institutional missions, and effectiveness. Potential goals for honors programs at community colleges include: (1) providing advanced students an opportunity to learn more than they would in a non-honors curriculum; (2) retaining a higher proportion of academically motivated students and faculty; (3) achieving higher transfer rates with honors participants; (4) enhancing institutional image; and (5) developing stronger relationships with senior institutions as a result of the potentially enhanced transferability of honors students. Honors programs have been criticized for seeming to introduce a note of elitism into the egalitarian goal of community colleges to provide education for everyone. Despite this criticism, the incidences of honors programs at two-year colleges has increased to 36% in the past 4 years (from 25% in 1995). Conclusions on the effectiveness of honors programs are tentative, since there is a scarcity of empirical data. The digest suggests that honors programs assessments could be strengthened by integrating more data on outcome measures, such as post-community college academic and/or employment success, rather than focusing solely on student satisfaction and characteristics. These programs deserve further systematic, outcome-oriented study. (EMH)

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# ERIC Digest

# Community College Honors Program

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Digest

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# Community College Honors Programs

by Charles Outcalt

With their emphasis on such outcomes as student transfer to four-year institutions, honors programs in community colleges have received increased attention as a result of growing concerns for institutional accountability. This Digest will describe honors programs, with regard to their origins and goals, consistency with institutional missions, incidence, structure, and effectiveness.

**Purpose of Honors Programs**

Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) note several potential goals for honors programs:

- Well-prepared students might learn more in these programs than in non-honors curricula;
- Community colleges might retain a higher proportion of academically motivated students, as well as faculty, if they offer challenging and enriching courses through honors programs;
- Transfer rates of honors participants might be higher than for non-honors students;
- Honors programs might enhance institutional public image; and,
- Community colleges might develop stronger relationships with senior institutions as a result of the potentially enhanced transferability of their honors students.

However, the effectiveness of honors programs in meeting these goals has yet to be evaluated systematically.

Byrne (1998), in his comprehensive review of honors programs in 38 colleges or districts in 19 states, found that some honors programs could be linked to the role of community colleges within each state's system of higher education. For example, California's Master Plan for higher education stipulates that the community colleges are to assist qualified students in transferring to senior institutions. Honors programs, with their emphasis on academic preparation, can contribute significantly to that portion of the state's community colleges' missions. In addition, Byrne found that a new impetus for honors programs arose in the mid-1980s, as community colleges sought to expand their range of services to students with high academic abilities. Accordingly, honors programs were often described as complementing an institution's range of programs for all student sub-groups.

**Possible Conflict with Institutional Missions**

Honors programs have been criticized for seeming to introduce a note of elitism into the egalitarian goal of community colleges to provide education for everyone (Olivas, 1975). These charges have been exacerbated by studies showing that honors program participants are more likely to be white and female than non-honors students (Lucas, 1995). However, the relationship between honors courses and minority student success need not be antagonistic. Some institutions, such as Mississippi's Itawamba Community College, have used supplemental instructional materials and methods in an honors course, including guest speakers and videos, to focus on the experience of cultural and ethnic minorities (Itawamba Community College, 1997). Students in this course reported very high degrees of satisfaction with the class form and content, and stated that their appreciation for pluralism had been enhanced by their experience in the course.

**The Incidence of Honors Programs**

Cohen and Brawer (1996) note that approximately 25% of community colleges offered honors programs, according to the 1995 *Peterson's Guide to Two-Year Colleges*. More recent preliminary results of a study based on data collected by the Center for the Study of Community College's Curriculum Research Project found that approximately 36% of community colleges nationwide offer honors programs (Outcalt, 1999).

**Access to and Organization of Honors Programs**

Outcalt (1999) found that community colleges offering honors programs used standardized test scores, college and/or high school grades, as well as alternative criteria as entrance criteria. A small minority allowed students to gain access to honors programs through non-academic means, such as special petitions based on life experience.

Byrne (1998) found that honors programs were arranged in a wide array of patterns, with most institutions offering their students a menu of one or more of the following options:

- Conversion of a standard course to honors status through the addition of more course requirements (e.g., research or lab work) (53% of the institutions reviewed by Byrne);
- Independent research, often based on previous coursework (53%);
- Targeted sections of standard

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courses, often featuring more reading, discussion, writing, independent study, or other additional requirements (84%).

- Special courses (68%), often of an interdisciplinary nature.

**Evaluating Honors Programs**

Assessment of honors programs could be strengthened by the integration of more data on outcome measures, such as post-community college academic and/or employment success. The overall evaluations that have been conducted show that honors students are typically white, female, and, in many schools, are older than the remainder of their institution's student body. These students transfer more often than their non-honors colleagues, and earn 10% more after graduation (Byrne, 1998).

However, conclusions on the effectiveness of honors programs must remain tentative, because, as Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) state, "There is a paucity of empirical data documenting the positive effects of community college honors programs on recruitment, retention, and public image." (p. 486) Bulakowski and Townsend add that the majority of honors programs assessments available in the literature tend to be single-institution studies demonstrating successful elements of individual programs, often focusing either on student satisfaction with the program, on the characteristics (especially demographic) of student participants, or on anecdotal evidence of program effectiveness.

A few researchers have transcended the limitations of most program evaluations by investigating the effect of participation in specific programs. Lucas (1995) sought to assess the long-term effect of enrollment in honors programs by surveying William Rainey Harper College (Illinois) students who had completed at least one honors course between 1990 and 1995. Questionnaires were mailed to 372 former honors program participants; the 165 respondents indicated that honors participants, who tended to be female, white, and had higher earnings than their non-honors colleagues, were more likely to complete a Bachelor's degree, and had higher self-esteem. In contrast to the findings of other, similar studies, Lucas found that honors program participants tended to be younger than their counterparts.

Laanan (1996) investigated the characteristics and experiences of student participants in UCLA's Transfer Alliance Program (TAP), which provides an honors curriculum for community college students seeking transfer to UCLA. Laanan found that, in comparison with their non-TAP counterparts, TAP students tended to be younger, were more likely to have taken honors courses at their community colleges, were more comfortable making contact with faculty at UCLA, were less likely to receive academic tutoring, and were also more likely to take part in UCLA's honors program. However, TAP students were more likely to experience "transfer shock," had lower college GPAs, and were more likely to be dissatisfied with what they perceived as the impersonal nature of UCLA.

**Conclusion**

The educational literature demonstrates the diversity of honors programs at community colleges across the nation, as befits the institutional diversity that characterizes these schools themselves. However, several common themes emerge from the literature: a) honors programs fit with the transfer function of community colleges; b) these programs allow institutions to serve a sub-population—the academically well-prepared—which has been often neglected by these schools; and c) these programs deserve further systematic, outcome-oriented study. Such research will doubtless contribute to community colleges' ability to meet the transfer and other academic needs of a potentially overlooked sub-population.

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